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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANJUL 000206

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DAKAR PASS DAO, ODC, AND RAO

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PINS CASC ASEC PHUM GA

SUBJECT: THE GAMBIA: UPDATE ON AFTERMATH OF ABORTED COUP PLOT

REF: A) BANJUL 194 B) BANJUL 178 C) BANJUL 190 D)

BANJUL 203

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOSEPH STAFFORD, REASON 1.4 (B AND D)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Sources portray President Jammeh as still recovering from a sense of shock and betrayal following the aborted coup attempt March 21, although he works to convey the image of a leader fully in charge in his public appearances. The GOTG itself has yet to provide much information on the foiled plot, relying on suspects' televised confessions. Sources report the release of seventeen (17) detainees cleared of involvement, including (10) military personnel; among the civilians released is a National Assembly deputy with the ruling party, Omar Camara, and prominent lawyer Antouman Gaye (list of detainees in para 8). To our knowledge, none of the remaining detainees has as yet been charged, and there are reports that some of the detainees have been beaten. The independent-minded National Assembly Speaker, Belinda Bidwell, spoke of her shock and deep disappointment over the coup plot, while judging that the Jammeh Government and the country generally had emerged unscathed and stable from the incident. She also predicted that the failed coup attempt would ensure Jammeh's re-election in the October 2006 contest. However, the closing of "The Independent" and the reported beatings of detainees casts a long shadow over Bidwell's rosy prediction. (NOTE: See late-breaking news para seven.) END SUMMARY.

OVERVIEW

¶2. (C) Two weeks after the aborted coup plot here March 21 (ref a), an atmosphere of calm and normality prevails in Banjul, as the jitteriness recedes and enhanced military and security presence at various checkpoints is no longer in evidence. Although sources portray President Jammeh as still recovering from his sense of shock and betrayal over the incident, in his latest public appearances he has worked to convey the image of a leader fully in charge. Attending a military graduation ceremony March 31, he alluded to the failed overthrow attempt in his address, stating, "there is no place in The Gambia for an alienated and self-seeking military and spoke of a "small, bleak cloud" that would quickly vanish. However, at a subsequent address that same day to mark the annual opening of the National Assembly's legislative session, Jammeh made no mention at all of the

overthrow attempt (highlights of address reported septel). His April 2 visits to several military barracks and a suburban commercial area near Banjul received heavy media coverage and featured the predictable cheering onlookers.

THE COUP PLOT

¶3. (C) The GOTG itself has yet to provide much information on the foiled plot, confining itself to its press release that the plot was at "an advanced stage" (ref b). Instead, it has left it to detainees to provide details via their televised confessions (refs a and c). At this point, our sense is that the plot was haphazardly planned by the ringleader, former Chief of Defense Staff Lt Col Ndure Cham, that active involvement was limited to a small minority of the Gambian military's officer corps along with a handful of civilians, among them Amcit (dual national) Tamsir Jasseh. A senior police official and Embassy contact claimed to us that Jasseh was "the brains" behind the plot and that the latter had far more to reveal about it than he had disclosed in his televised confession. In any event, we surmise that Cham's plot involved a dozen or so officers seizing various key sites -- e.g. presidential offices, radio and television stations, etc. -- the evening of March 21. We surmise that when word of the plot leaked to other senior officers several hours in advance of the plot's implementation, Cham simply abandoned the plot and fled out of recognition that he lacked adequate support within the military.

UPDATE ON DETENTIONS AND RELEASES

¶4. (C) Cham remains at large, and, according to our sources, may well have moved from his original hiding place in the Casamance to northern Senegal or another neighboring state. Meanwhile, the list of civilian detainees included, inter alia, two National Assembly deputies, Omar Camara

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(subsequently released--see para 8) and Demba Dem, both with the ruling APRC party. Asked about these and other civilian detainees, a well-informed journalist and Embassy contact, Pap Saine, editor-in-chief of the daily, "The Point," asserted to us that most were picked up because their names were mentioned in confessions by the initially detained suspects. We subsequently learned of the release of 17 detainees (see para 8).

¶5. (C) To our knowledge, none of the remaining detainees, military or civilian, has been charged as yet. Our sources indicate that a panel of investigators, composed of senior military, police, and intelligence officials, continues to question suspects. Asked about conditions of confinement, Saine told us April 3 that he had picked up reports that some of the detainees had been beaten by police officials and mentioned former National Intelligence Agency Director Daba Marena as among the victims. Saine also indicated that authorities have yet to permit any access, including by family members, to the detainees. (NOTE: On April 4, Ambassador contacted Interior Minister Baboucarr Jatta to repeat our request for access to detained Amcit Tamsir Jasseh and to register concern over the reported abuses of detainees. Jatta took note of Ambassador's presentation and undertook to get back with a response. We are not aware, at this point, of any local or foreign organizations requesting access to the detainees; Pol/EconOff contacted the Africa Center for Human Rights and Democracy, which indicated that it had yet to request access. END NOTE)

ASSESSMENT OF DEPUTY SPEAKER

¶6. (C) In April 4 discussion with Ambassador, the National Assembly's independent-minded Deputy Speaker, Belinda Bidwell (appointed by Jammeh to the National Assembly, but not an

APRC member) said she had been shocked and deeply disappointed to learn of the attempted coup. Bidwell explained that she had thought that The Gambia's political development had reached a point where such unconstitutional attempts to change the government were a thing of the past. She judged, though, that both the Jammeh government and the country itself had emerged unscathed and stable from the episode. She perceived the Gambian public to be rallying around Jammeh following the failed coup attempt and, referring to this groundswell of popular support for Jammeh, asserted that "this failed plot has ensured his re-election in the fall.". When Ambassador expressed concern over worrisome developments in the coup plot's aftermath, e.g. closure of the journal, "The Independent" (ref d) and the reported abuse of detainees, Bidwell said she was also concerned and would get further details on these developments.

LATE-BREAKING DEVELOPMENT ON DETAINEES

¶7. (SBU) As this cable was being drafted in the late afternoon of April 4, the Embassy received a press release from the Office of Inspector General of Police alleging that five suspected coup plotters escaped when their vehicle almost overturned as they were being transferred from Mile Two Prison (Banjul) to Janjanbureh Prison (near Georgetown). Among the alleged escapees was the former Director General of the National Intelligence Agency, Daba Marena. Additional details to be provided septel.

COMMENT

¶8. (C) We have as yet picked up no signs that a GOTG crackdown on the opposition parties is underway, and several opposition leaders have issued statements condemning the coup. However, if, as the National Assembly Deputy Speaker suggests, the coup attempt created a groundswell of popular support for Jammeh, it is possible that the closure of "The Independent" and the reported abuse of detainees will have the opposite effect. We will continue to register our concern about these developments in upcoming meetings requested with senior GOTG officials. END COMMENT.

LIST OF DETAINEES RELEASED

¶9. (SBU) Following is a list of those released to-date according to our sources:

Major Ebrima Bah - Commander Yundum Barracks
Major Sainey Bayo

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Lt. Commander M. B. Sarr - former Commander, Gambia Navy
Captain Y. N. Jallow
Captain Famara Jammeh - State Guard
Lieutenant M. Savage - State Guard
Sergeant Abdoulie Sanyang - State Guard
Private Sonko - State Guard
Ebrima Camara - former Police Commissioner
Momat Cham - retired army major, former minister in the military regime of 1994

Mr. Omar Camara - APRC NAM for Kantora
Mrs. Camara - wife of APRC NAM Omar Camara
Lamin Gassama - Security Manager, GCAA
Ebou Waggeh - former GRTS Producer
Antouman Gaye - prominent lawyer
Ousman Seye - Quranic Teacher
Adama Deen - former MD at the Ports Authority

STAFFORD